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**THE ROLE OF THE STUDENTS TEACHERS' OBSERVATIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR TEACHING SKILLS DURING TEACHING PRACTICE**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to analyze the role of observation in the development of student teachers' teaching skills during the teaching practice. While it is acknowledged in this paper that student teachers may also develop their teaching skills by being observed by their pupils; mentors and college supervisors, the analysis in this paper is restricted to student teachers observing their mentors teach. The paper also discusses what teachers' colleges and schools should do in terms of preparing student teachers for the "observation period".

**INTRODUCTION**

Just as the best place to learn to swim is in water in a swimming pool, so the best place to learn to teach should be in a real classroom situation with real children. Most educationists such as Stones and Morris (1972), Tibble (1971), Olaitain and Agusibo (1981) and many other unheralded educationists concur with this statement. There is no doubt therefore that many educationists believe that teaching practice is an essential component of the student teachers' professional training.

In Zimbabwe, the current mode of teaching practice, is such that student teachers in their second year are deployed to schools where they are attached to qualified, experienced teachers who immediately assume the role of "mentoring" them. The mentors are supposed to monitor and advise the student teachers on matters pertaining to their teaching. That being the case, one of the ways which student teachers learn how to teach during teaching practice period, is through observing their mentors teach. Since observation plays a crucial role in the development of student teachers' teaching skills, there is need for both teacher educators and classroom practitioners to train student teachers to observe lessons professionally. On the other hand, student teachers should also endeavour to do professional observations of lessons as opposed to lay observations.

It must be emphasised that student teachers on attachment teaching practice should not be as additional teachers to the schools but as students who require maximum help and guidance from the experienced teachers and therefore must be treated as such. It is therefore against this background that this paper sought to analyze the role of student teachers' lesson observation in the development of their teaching skills.

Evans (1986), says that although students may look at a good teacher at work, they fail to see. The problem is analogous to a situation described by Robinson (1980) of someone watching a conjurer at work. He (Robinson) says you may watch the conjurer pull an "egg" out of a lady's ear many times, but never see how he does it. In this same way students may watch a good teacher at work without necessarily comprehending how he (conjurer) gets ready to pull the "egg" out of the lady's ear, someone must be around to whisper to the observer to ignore the conjurer's right hand which is moving so fast. He should instead look at the conjurer's left hand, which he will see creeping slowly down into his coat tails to collect the egg. This analogy therefore calls for teacher educators to fully prepare student teachers for the observation period so that they know what, when and how to observe lessons if they are to develop meaningful skills.

It is acknowledged in this paper that the student teacher may also develop his skills by being observed by his pupils, mentors and supervisors. However, the intention of this paper is to analyze the role of observation in the development of student teacher's teaching skills when the student teacher is observing a qualified teacher (mentor) teaching.

### **WHAT IS OBSERVATION**

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines observations as "the accurate watching and noting of phenomena as they occur in nature" (p 1025). If accurate watching is to take place, then the observer has to be trained on what to look for in a lesson. Being a skilled observer means knowing what to look for, having expectations and checking them against reality (Hodson, 1992). The implications for this in teacher education is that before students go to observe qualified teachers teaching, they have to be trained on how and what to observe during the lessons. One way of accomplishing this, is to have students video of exemplary lessons. After watching the videos, both student and lecturers should discuss the lesson. It is during this post observation conference that guidelines on what to focus on during the observation period are set.

The student's observation can be focused specifically on such items as: timing of lesson introduction, lesson development, methods used, class management, lesson conclusion and other daily routines such as marking the register, marking written exercises etc. If the student teacher is to benefit from the observation of the forementioned skills, then it is important for the student teacher and the class teacher (mentor) to agree on what aspects to be observed by the student teacher so that the class teacher gets well prepared for the task. It is wise for the student teacher to focus on a few skills at a time if he/she is going to get the most benefit out of observing lessons. It is also important for the mentor to know what sort of skills the student teacher will be focusing on so that he/she can deliberately put some emphasis on these skills during the teaching process. The observation process is supposed to be an open affair between the observer and observee and not a hide and seek game.

Before students go to observe their mentors, they should be issued with observation forms so that they can keep a record of their experiences in the school. The forms should provide a useful focus on what to observe. Students are also required to keep a journal where they will commit reflections on their experiences in the school.

During observations students are expected to pick various teaching techniques from the mentors. Therefore it is important for College lecturers and students to decide on which classroom phenomena are most worthy of the student teachers' attention. Students are expected to observe lessons actively so that they are able to analyze their observations critically and be in a position to separate pedagogically sound practice from non pedagogical behaviour.

A post-observation conference should be held soon after the lesson to discuss the student-teachers' findings. This conference helps to clarify any "misperceptions" the students might have got from the observation process. After this post-observation conference, student teachers should be given a chance to teach a few lessons so that they can practice what they have been observing. The idea of the student teacher observing the mentor teaching, then having a post-observation conference and the student teacher teaching again should be encouraged throughout the teaching practice period for the benefit of the student teacher.

### **PURPOSE OF THE OBSERVATION PERIOD:**

For a student teacher, the purpose of observation is to learn to understand the significance of children's behaviour in terms of (a) their motivation (b) their circumstances including the actions of adults who are present and (c) their likely future behaviour (Collier 1969). In other words, during the observation period student teachers should see how an experienced teacher teaches and how children react to him and his teaching material.

If the student teachers are to learn anything from the observation period then the teachers' colleges should make an effort to have student teachers get attached to competent qualified teachers. It is the responsibility of the teachers colleges to ensure that the student teachers are attached to competent teachers by closely liaising with the head teachers of co-operating schools and insisting that students be attached to competent teachers.

In view of this, both teachers' colleges and schools should work out a systematic programme for training mentors. It is grossly erroneous to assume that all qualified teachers can be effective mentors. There is need for teachers to get trained as mentors, a programme which I think is now overdue. It is unfortunate that the cart was put before the horse when the implementation of the attachment teaching practice was done before a serious programme to train mentors was put in place. In fact its high time a systematic training of mentors was instituted without any further delay for the benefit of education in Zimbabwe.

In most teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe, the first year students are offered an opportunity to observe and teach in schools or the first two or three weeks of the third term, preferably in their home areas. It would appear that their students are attached to competent teachers because the students will be scattered throughout the country. However, the colleges rely on the assumption that headmasters will attach the student teachers to competent teachers. But one cannot rule out the possibility of some student teachers being attached to incompetent teachers during this crucial period of their training. If it happens that the students are attached to incompetent teachers then the consequences would not be nice to contemplate.

Therefore if the home area teaching practice is to bear any benefits to the student teacher, colleges should ensure that student teachers are attached to teachers who will give them the "right" experiences. Instead of colleges just "asking students to go on home area teaching practice where college lecturers cannot monitor them, colleges should endeavour to deploy students to schools which are well acquainted with college expectations so that they can guide the students accordingly. The present concept of home area teaching practice where student teachers can so go to any school in the country, whilst being cost effective may not be the best in terms of student benefiting from the observation period.

Since observation is theory impregnated, one is likely to see what he knows or is familiar to him. An example is in biology where students using a microscope may find it very difficult to "see" anything if they do not have the relevant theoretical background of what they will be seeing. For instance biology students with a poor theoretical background of the structure of plant cells may see air bubbles on the microslide as distinct organelles of the plant cell under a light microscope. The same could be said of student teachers observing their mentors.

They need relevant pedagogical knowledge if they are to make any meaningful observations of lessons.

Very often, student remark that they cannot see the point of sitting at the back of a classroom when the other teacher is teaching. Of course they cannot "see" if they do not have a sound theoretical background of what they will be observing. Therefore before students go observe teachers in schools they need a strong theoretical framework to base their observations on. If students have a sound theoretical background of teaching principles then they are likely to make informed observations. With a sound theoretical background good teaching from bad teaching.

The whole idea of the observation period is to produce a reflective teacher who will be able to establish the rationale of the teachers' and pupils' actions during the teaching learning situations. Reflection in observation is the key word, otherwise if the student teacher does not reflect on his observations, it defeats the whole purpose of the observation period. Therefore student teachers should be encouraged to discuss the implications of their findings with their mentors or other students.

During the observation period, student teachers learn from two modes of experiences or direct encounter and modelling or observational learning (Evans 1986). The direct encounter mode involves the student teachers learning by interpreting what they perceive. This mode of learning can be faulty because people's perceptions are usually determined by one's past experience and previous knowledge and so the students' perceptions of the observed lessons are likely to differ from one individual to another. Since students' observations are likely to be determined by what they already know, they have to acquire a sound theoretical background on principles of teaching before they go to observe lessons so that they can use that knowledge to make informed observations.

Interpretations of what is observed needs to be based n pedagogical principles to avoid relying on one's limited experiences. To that end the student teachers need guidance in interpreting their perceptions hence an emphasis on student having a post-observation conference with their mentors and other student teachers.

The second mode, modelling or learning by watching the performance o another requires the learner to attend to and perceive the constituent parts of an act and later to construct a behaviour from the constituent parts (Olson and Bruner (1974) in Evans 1986). When modelling, the student teacher does not have access to the reasons for the teachers' action. Since teaching is much more than what can be observed, the student teachers needs to know the teach-

ers' intentions and the basis on which the activities were chosen. Learning from observation can have serious limitations if conducted without opportunities for regular discussions with college supervisors or the mentors.

Another limitations of learning by observations is that, no matter how versatile a master teacher is, he can only offer a limited set of skills, attitudes and personality traits (Stones and Morris 1972). In view of this, it would be more beneficial for a student teacher to observe as many teachers as possible so that he/she can benefit from the different one teacher throughout the observation period puts a limit to what the student teacher can benefit from the observation period.

There is also no guarantee that the student teachers will observe the right techniques during the observation period. In the light of this, there is need to develop the critical faculty of the student teacher so that he/she can at least be in a position to distinguish good teaching from bad teaching. To a student who does not have a critical faculty, the findings of the observation period are likely to be taken as absolute. If this happens then it will be most unfortunate.

However, according to research findings by Evans, (1986), the observation assignment helps student teachers to develop positive attitudes toward children before they assume any responsibility for teaching. Some researchers like Ryan (1982 and Wilson (1975) in Evans (1986) also cite the benefits of observing as generating an awareness and an interest in teaching. This sounds true because during observation, the student teacher learns what it is like or what it feels to be a teacher and this can be learned on the spot.

Secondly, the period of observation allows for deliberate watching and noting of classroom experiences which students will try to relate to theory. However, relating theory to practice is not an easy task because it is not always the case that theory influences practice, because in some situations practice can also influence theory. Therefore this calls for students developing a critical faculty so as to appreciate their observation findings.

Thirdly, the observation period offers the student teachers an opportunity to learn valuable teaching skills such as instructional techniques, classroom management skills etc. (Evans 1986).

## **CONCLUSION:**

In my view if the observation period is going to develop the student teacher's teaching skills, he has to be critical of his observations throughout the whole observation period. The obser-



vation period should also be followed up by serious reflections when students go back to college. It is through these report back sessions that students and lecturers can iron out any "misperceptions" that might have arisen during the observation period.

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